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DISPOSITIONS AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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Obecne reformy szkolne w USA w większości koncentrują się na *odpowiedzialności*, pod etykietą testowania wyników pracy nauczycieli. Bywa że konsekwencją takiego kierunku jest spłaszczanie programów nauczania do obserwowalnych zachowań uczniowskich, a tym samym do opanowywania przez uczniów oderwanych od siebie pojęć czy umiejętności. Implikuje to także styl pracy nauczycieli, którzy stają się bardziej *technikami nauczania*, określającymi szczegółowe postępowanie uczniów w procesie uczenia się. Obecnie w USA obserwuje się działania szkół przeciwne jednostronnemu ograniczaniu pomiaru wyników nauczania do obserwowalnych zachowań na rzecz działania wspierającego rozwój uczniów. Z badań wynika, że takie szkoły odnoszą także akademickie sukcesy mierzone testami oraz zaangażowaniem uczniów w uczenie się. Jednakże przede wszystkim zorientowanie szkoły na rozwój uczniów pociąga za sobą konsolidację współpracy zespołu nauczycielskiego.

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CURRENT REFORM AND TECHNICAL TEACHING

Current educational reform efforts underway across the United States tend to focus on mandates including national curricula and national testing labeled an accountability movement, assuring that no child is left behind. The often unarticulated consequence of this movement has been a narrowing of the curriculum and pressure to make certain often isolated and disconnected facts and concepts are covered in time to not only meet end of grade timelines, but often benchmark testing throughout the school year. Teachers find themselves acting more as technicians following prompts,

pacing guides, and pre-packaged materials rather than relying on their professional education, expertise, and instincts. They feel limited in employing what they know helps students to learn not only information, but deep understanding and ultimately what it means to be a positive member of the school society and our future democracy. The belief that technical “how to” knowledge is sufficient for producing teacher excellence is a false one (Collinson, 1999) that is being perpetuated by No Child Left Behind (2005) and limiting exemplary teachers in terms of pedagogy that may move student achievement far beyond the limits of accountability testing. Related proposals for educational “reform” such as vouchers, charter school management companies, national mandates for statewide curricula standards, and high stakes testing may be well intended, but may actually exacerbate inequalities, and may cause us both to misrecognize what actually produces difficult social and educational problems and perhaps to miss some important democratic alternatives that may offer more hope for true reform in the long run (Apple, 2000; Apple, 2001; Apple & Beane, 1999).

THE MIDDLE SCHOOL MOVEMENT PUSHES BACK

Within the United States, there have been movements that have served as a push back to the testing agenda. One such movement, the middle school movement, resists such limitations on teaching and embraces a solid knowledge base related to teaching and reaching young adolescents grounded in the Carnegie Foundation’s *Turning Points* (1989). In essence, middle level schools should be built around and capitalize on the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. Further, such schools *are successful*. The more middle level schools fully implement NMSA supported components, the greater student *achievement* (Felner et al., 1997). Lee and Smith’s (1993) findings show that increased elements of middle school based restructuring were positively associated with academic achievement and increased engagement of eighth graders as learners. Russel (1997) also found that implementation of the middle school concept is positively related to student achievement scores. Although the issue is complex, schools that implement more *Turning Points’* (1989) recommendations show greater gains in student outcomes, with the aim being equitable high achievement for all types of students (National Middle School Association, 2002).

But these schools are also under the pressure of testing and accountability. The teachers within them are pushed to act as technicians. So, what is different about these teachers that enables them to enact the research related to best practices, to maintain their commitment to acting as democratic edu-

cators? It may be that they possess the disposition to enact the principles of democracy in the middle school that James Beane (1993) advocates. One could argue that they are in schools that enable these dispositions to develop and flourish. Then what can we learn about their dispositions that would help all of us to become the kind of teachers that really help students to achieve even beyond test scores? However, given today's reality it is likely such teachers find themselves in places that do not support what they know is developmentally appropriate and best for students. They possess the dispositions to find ways to do so anyway. It may be even more essential that we ask, "What can we learn from *them*?"

DEFINING DISPOSITIONS: DISPOSITIONS IN ACTION

If teachers are to be more than mere "cogs" in the educational process, they must possess the dispositions necessary to teach and reach students (Wenzlaff, 1998). Dispositions animate, motivate, and direct abilities and are present in the patterns of one's frequent behaviors (Ritchhart, 2001). These behaviors may be thought of as dispositions in action. A study of teachers engaged in a "model" middle school (Thornton, 2006a) and studies of "exemplary" middle school teachers (Thornton 2006b) lead to the ongoing work of identifying dispositions in action based in describing what is seen in practice. This construct is not focused, as some definitions of dispositions are, on personality traits, minimal behavior expectations, or self-reported values, but rather on patterns of thought which are revealed through interactions between teachers and students how one is disposed to think and act as an educator. It is concerned with how a teacher's dispositions affect students as learners. In order to learn from teachers with various dispositions, we need to have a framework that we can use to help us understand what we mean by the term. This framework allows us to center dispositions on teaching and learning.

Dispositions in action include two emergent categories of dispositions: responsive and technical (Thornton, 2006a). The disposition to be responsive is a thinking-based orientation that is responsive in many dimensions: responsive to the needs and actions of the learner, their developmental characteristics, their cultural background and experiences, their levels of understanding, student questions, student work samples, and the learning context. In contrast, teachers who are technically disposed exemplify the role of teacher as technician, knowing how to successfully employ the skills of teaching, but typically not highly valuing or examining the why. There is often little variation from situation to situation and student to student.

Responsive Dispositions	Classroom Function	Technical Dispositions
<p>The disposition to be Critical in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: probing, focused on quality, centered on criteria, concerned with deep understanding</p> <p>The disposition to be Challenging in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: centered on high expectations, student competence and success for all students</p>	<i>Assessment</i>	<p>The disposition to be Assuming in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: centered on completion of tasks, focused on correctness, concerned with grades</p> <p>The disposition to be Accepting in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: indicative of low expectations, focused on effort and compliance</p>
<p>The disposition to be Facilitative in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: guiding, inquiry oriented, concerned with application and connections to students' lives, and real world examples, in search of multiple answers and the exchange of ideas</p> <p>The disposition to be Creative in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: about multiple ways of framing learning, examples, and paths to understanding diverse learners, responsive to students' questions, comments</p>	<i>Instruction</i>	<p>The disposition to be Directing in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: about directing actions of students, coverage of facts, telling information and giving answers</p> <p>The disposition to be Repetitive in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: lacking in variety in explaining, exemplifying or representing learning, repetitive, the same way for all students</p>
<p>The disposition to be Empowering in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: concerned with student input related to classroom instructional decisions, centered on fairness and equity</p> <p>The disposition to be in Connected one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: centered on developmental needs, exhibits "withitness" problem solving, conflict resolution and responsiveness to students as individuals</p>	<i>Management</i>	<p>The disposition to be Controlling in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: concerned with managing student behaviors and actions including movement, talking, and other forms of interaction</p> <p>The disposition to be Disconnected in one's thinking. Evidenced in dialogue that is: often limited, general in nature, generic, often remaining the same from class to class and situation to situation</p>

Evidence of dispositions tends to align with major classroom functions including instruction, assessment and management as described in the chart below. It is important to note the differentiation between these functions is for the purposes of analyzing dispositions through the use of interaction and discourse rather than a reflection of a true separation among these classroom events. The chart below describes the various teacher “dispositions in action”.

STORIES FROM TEACHERS IN THE FIELD

Using the framework from my earlier studies, I set out to see what I could learn from middle school teachers given the challenges of today’s reform movements. What seemed to be the challenges teachers faced? How did dispositions come into play? How was student learning affected? Throughout my work with veteran and pre-serve teachers centering on dispositions in action over the last eight years several assertions have been made related to potential barriers that may keep even the most responsively disposed teachers from being able to act as their “true selves”, who they are truly disposed to be within the classroom. The accountability movement and high stakes testing is most often named as one of those barriers. Yet somehow teachers in the same schools and same districts with the same accountability pressures seem to respond to these pressures in their classrooms very differently. It comes back to the original question asked earlier in this piece, is there something different about some teachers’ dispositions that enable them to do what is best for their students ... even given barriers, or are those barriers really the problem?

Another barrier that is often reported as keeping teachers from being able to implement best practices is the background of students, typically in terms of home environment or socio-economic class factors. Yet another issue that frequently surfaces is the impact of subject area. I am consistently told that Mathematics leads teachers to act as if they were more technically disposed, while Language Arts leads one to exhibit a responsive disposition. Further, due to grade level testing and pressures related to high school entrance, 6th grade teaching positions permit teachers to behave more responsively, while 8th grade pressures do not allow teachers to do so. So what can we learn from teachers in the field responding to these barriers from looking into their classrooms, at the learning going on there and at how their dispositions may be a factor related to student learning? Are the external factors, the potential barriers, what seems to be pivotal in what happens in the classroom? Or is it something internal that teachers bring with them that seems to matter more ... their dispositions?

QUESTIONS

Based on concerns that were expressed by teachers in schools, at conferences, and in graduate classes as discussed above, the following questions were generated to help focus a closer examination of the issues at hand and to select teachers and schools that would help to more clearly look at them. The questions were:

Does the type of school setting make a difference (high performing or low do teachers feel pressured to teach to the test; does low/high SES make a difference; does having more "at risk" students") in the nature of teacher dispositions evidenced?

Does the content area make a difference in the type of dispositions teachers are able to evidence (Math is said to be more "black and white" and thus "technical" and "right answer" and "direction," "step following" driven)? Does grade level assignment?

Do the teacher's dispositions (responsive vs. technical) make a difference in the depth of student understanding and nature of student thinking/learning in the classroom?

An intentional sample was used to select teachers as part of a multiple case study that examined the above questions (Patton, 1990). Two content fields were represented, Language Arts and Mathematics. Two middle schools were chosen for the study, one on the edge of a city undergoing a rapid shift in student population to becoming more diverse, including students from an increasingly lower income base. This school is considered to have an urban setting with a population of 34.4% African American, 0.6% Native American, 5.5% Asian, 11.9% Hispanic, 4.0% Multiracial, and 43.5% Caucasian students. The other school is located in an affluent suburb of the city including a small rural section of families with a population of 14.1% African American, 0.1% Native American, 3.3% Asian, 3.0% Hispanic, 4.5% Multiracial, and 74.7% Caucasian students. Both schools reside in a district that is heavily focused on implementation of No Child Left Behind and assuring that *all* schools in the district met AYP (annual yearly progress) goals, regardless of Title I status.

A total of eight teachers were involved in the case studies, four sixth grade and four eighth grade. All eight are veteran teachers who have been involved as supervising teachers within a university PDS partnership for a period of at least three years and have worked as supervising teachers for at least seven years. All possess master's degrees, and have been teaching for a minimum of ten years. Half are National Board certified, with an additional two seeking certification. All were identified by their principals as strong

teachers qualified to serve as role models and mentors for teacher preparation, and as involved in leadership roles within their schools, as well as in ongoing professional development and professional organizations. In essence, teachers were “paired” to illustrate comparisons between: grade level (same school, same subject), subject (same grade and school), and SES (same subject, same grade level). Teacher “quality” was identified as “high” across all teachers by the factors listed above, and student success and standardized measures. An attempt to represent the range of technical and responsive dispositions was made. Teachers in both buildings were observed multiple times and initial ratings were given using the dispositions in action observation tool based on classroom interaction and dialogue recorded as field notes and analyzed as representing the various dispositions (appendix A).

	Math Suburban	Math Urban	Language Arts Suburban	Language Arts Urban
High Responsive	Drummings-6th	Bennett-6th	Lofton-6th	Mayton-8th
Low Responsive	Smith-8th	Green-8th	Barton-8th	Rollins-6th

Multiple observations of the final eight teachers were then conducted and analyzed using the dispositions in action model, described earlier, over a six month period. Interviews (appendix B) were conducted with each teacher to get further insight and verification of the observations’ findings. Teachers were scored in each domain: Critical/Assuming, Challenging/Accepting, Facilitating/Directing, Creative/Repetitive, Empowering/Controlling, Connected/Disconnected. A summary score (appendix C) was compiled for each teacher on a scale of 0–6, with a 6 representing the teacher consistently evidencing a majority of responsive dispositions in each of the domains over time and a 0 representing the teacher consistently evidencing technical dispositions over time.

STUDENT LEARNING

Students in all of these classrooms typically did well on standardized measures. The focus on the types of learning that cultivate thinking, that meet young adolescent’s need to develop cognitively, to move toward abstract thinking, to grapple with issues of identity, decision making, and diverse perspectives can not be captured through such assessments. The SOLO (structure of observed learning outcomes) taxonomy (Biggs & Collis, 1982) has been used in nation-wide studies of National Board Certified Teachers (NBPTS, 2000) in helping to determine NBCTs’ impact on student learning. It allows for an analysis of the depth of student understanding

across multiple types of assessments from informal to formal. During observations, field notes were taken to evidence types of learning that transpired in the eight classrooms. SOLO scores were recorded and the level of learning (appendix D) that was predominately evidenced across observations was determined ranging from pre-structural, unistructural, multi-structural, and relational to extended abstract. The results are in the table below.

	Math Suburban	Math Urban	Language Arts Suburban	Language Arts Urban
High Responsive	Drummings	Bennett	Lofton	Mayton
Level of Responsive Disposition	6	3.5	2	6
SOLO Level	Extended-abstract	multistructural	unistructural	Extended-abstract
Low Responsive	Smith	Green	Barton	Rollins
Level of Responsive Disposition	2	0	0	2
SOLO Level	multistructural	unistructural	unistructural	multistructural

DEPTH OF UNDERSTANDING AND NATURE OF STUDENT THINKING

An overall analysis of the nature of student learning within these classrooms, over time, included both formal and informal measures using the SOLO taxonomy including classroom discussions, student conferencing, student work samples, projects, written responses and assignments. This revealed that higher levels of responsive teacher dispositions result in deeper student understanding and more complex thinking. This is especially true at the higher ends of the range, where a level 6 (all responsive dispositions) correlates with extended abstract thinking and a level 0 (all technical dispositions) correlates with unistructural. Teachers with responsive dispositions were able to help students make an increasing number of connections within the content matter to create conceptual understanding as well as make connections to the real world. Young adolescents began to understand beyond concrete levels and to grasp abstract concepts that comprise our society and belief systems, such as productivity, justice, equity, and empathy.

It is incumbent upon educators to see that the educational experience is one that encourages students to think, to evaluate and to decide. In order

for democracy to work, for students to become contributing members of an increasingly complex and diverse society they must possess not only basic knowledge and skills represented in standardized testing, but also the ability to think in deeper ways that are representative of what an educated democratic citizen should be like and able to do. They must be able to move beyond the surface level of unistructural thinking. Democracy in schools must be concerned with gathering and weighing evidence to determine good reasons for believing something and understanding other's perspectives. These are things which we rightfully expect an educated person to do (Levin, 1998). These goals move far beyond those that can be measured by standardized testing.

SCHOOL SETTING

Next, the multiple cases represented in these various teachers' classrooms and the differences in the two schools were compared and contrasted using a cross case analysis (Patton, 1990). The urban school in this study faces what was reported as additional challenges such as a higher rate of at risk students and identified special needs students, and a greater number of students dealing with issues of poverty. Concern related to achievement tests scores in the urban setting focuses on getting more students to the minimum competency level while the suburban school, struggles to get those illusive top points at the high end to meet annual yearly progress goals. Teachers and administrators in both schools reported pressure related to increasing test scores as a major concern and as a stated goal and priority of the district. Dispositions evidenced over the six month period varied somewhat from the initial ratings, with two initially highly responsive teachers scoring in the average to lower range, with Bennett receiving a score of 3, and Lofton scoring only a 2. Interestingly, both of the most responsive teachers each came from a different school, one suburban, and one urban, as well as the least responsively disposed. There were clear differences in the school contexts and settings, but teachers who were disposed to be highly responsive and those who were not were present and evidence of both types of dispositions consistently documented in both schools. Responsive teachers and the levels of deep understanding related to these dispositions were able to thrive regardless of the school context, urban or suburb. Young adolescents in both schools are entitled to learn to think beyond a surface level of understanding and to develop the requisite thinking and evaluative skills and depth of understanding needed to be successful members and leaders of our future democracy.

CONTENT AREA AND GRADE LEVEL

Math and Language Arts had surfaced repeatedly in informal conversations with veteran and pre-service teachers as content areas that seemed somehow inherently related to specific tendencies of dispositions in action. Thus, the study was set up so this could be a factor that was teased out within the case analysis. The two overall highest scores in terms of responsive dispositions were found, one each field, Math and Language Arts. So were the two lowest scores. The mid-range scores also revealed no direct connection between content area and disposition. The classrooms of the Math and Language Arts teachers who were disposed to be highly responsive mirrored one another and evidenced the same types of relationships, dialogue, interactions, and types of deep meaningful learning regardless of the content involved. The content was the vehicle to cultivate the types of thinking, questioning, decision making and understanding in each classroom. The way the teachers were disposed to think and act was the same, but revealed through the best practices that cut across content boundaries. The same was true of grade level. Content did not limit opportunities to move beyond technical thinking and action toward the goals of student understanding and cultivating future citizens of our society.

CONCLUSION

Cultivating and supporting teachers who possess responsive dispositions may be difficult. These teachers may be viewed as “teaching against the grain” and in K-12 schools where raising student test scores has become the major and sometimes only goal, teachers who work against the grain are often not in demand, and in fact, new teachers who work completely with the grain may be the most sought after (Cochran-Smith, 2001). But if real issues of middle level student achievement are related to dispositional dimensions such as high expectations, commitment, and the disposition to embrace reform, as suggested by Brown, Roney & Anfara (2003), we must focus on supporting them. This must be accomplished through our teacher education programs, meaningful professional development in the form of mentoring, co-teaching and learning communities, and development of political action to give informed voice and develop public relations to counter the unchallenged assumptions related to the benefits of current high stakes testing and misguided implementation of No Child Left Behind.

By their dispositional orientation such teachers are focused on empowerment, connecting with others, and being critical leaders of change and

school improvement. If these dispositions are supported within their lives as teachers, they have the potential to help all young adolescents engage in meaningful learning, deep understanding, and achievement of high standards. Within middle schools these teachers are listening to students and honoring their voices to build democratic classrooms. They believe as Al-phonse Kohn (1993) that students should not be limited to learning how to live in a democracy when they grow up but rather have the opportunity to live in one today, specifically in their educational experiences. These teachers are disposed to lead middle level education through current reform in a direction that will enable young adolescents, our profession, and the middle school movement to continue to question, analyze, evaluate and grow in knowledge and understanding that is responsive to the needs of our world and our future. Through them, the middle school movement may continue to push back.

Appendix A

Critical	Assuming
probing, quality criteria deep understanding	completion of tasks, correctness, grades
Challenging	Accepting
high expectations student competence success for all students	low expectations, focus on focus on effort and compliance
Facilitative	Directing
guiding, inquiry oriented, application connections to students' lives, and real world examples multiple answers, exchange of ideas	directing the learning coverage of facts, information or answers
Creative	Repetitive
multiple ways of framing learning, examples, and paths to understanding of diverse learners, response to students' questions and comments	lack of variety in explaining, exemplifying or representing learning repetition, the same way for all students
Empowering	Controlling
Student input related to classroom instructional decisions, expectations fairness and equity	managing student behaviors and actions including movement, talking, and other forms of interaction
Connected	Disconnected
developmental needs, "withitness", problem solving, conflict resolution and responsiveness to students as individuals	dialogue is often limited, comments general in nature, or generic, often remaining the same from class to class and situation to situation

Appendix B

Interview Guide Questions:

What do you consider the most important aspects of **assessment** in your classroom?

What do you consider the most important aspects of **curriculum & instruction** in your classroom?

What do you consider the most important aspects of **classroom management** in your classroom?

What do you consider the most important aspects of **professionalism**?

Appendix C

Drummings

critical X		assuming
challenging X		accepting
facilitating X		directing
creative X		repetitive
empowering X		controlling
connected X		disconnected
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Bennett

critical		assuming X
challenging		accepting X
facilitating X		directing
creative	X	repetitive
empowering X		controlling
connected X		disconnected
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Lofton

critical		assuming X
challenging		accepting X
facilitating X		directing
creative X		repetitive
empowering		controlling X
connected		disconnected X
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Mayton

critical X		assuming
challenging X		accepting
facilitating X		directing
creative X		repetitive
empowering X		controlling
connected X		disconnected
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Smith

critical		assuming X
challenging		accepting X
facilitating		directing X
creative X		repetitive
empowering		controlling X
connected X		disconnected
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Green

critical		assuming X
challenging		accepting X
facilitating		directing X
creative		repetitive X
empowering		controlling X
connected		disconnected X
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Barton

critical		assuming X
challenging		accepting X
facilitating		directing X
creative		repetitive X
empowering		controlling X
connected		disconnected X
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Rollins

critical		assuming X
challenging		accepting X
facilitating X		directing
creative		repetitive X
empowering		controlling X
connected X		disconnected
1 pt.	5 pt.	0 pt.

Appendix D

The SOLO taxonomy stands for:

Structure of

Observed

Learning

Outcomes

1. **Pre-structural:** here students are simply acquiring bits of unconnected information, which have no organization and make no sense.

2. **Unistructural:** simple and obvious connections are made, but their significance is not grasped.

3. **Multistructural:** a number of connections may be made, but the meta-connections between them are missed, as is their significance for the whole.

4. **Relational** level: the student is now able to appreciate the significance of the parts in relation to the whole.

5. At the **extended abstract** level, the student is making connections not only within the given subject area, but also beyond it, able to generalize and transfer the principles and ideas underlying the specific instance.

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